

How U.S. Made Unholy Alliance With the Mafia

PAUL MESKIL

Part of a series

When Fidel Castro threw the American gangsters out of Cuba, they vowed to return—over his dead body.

Their determination to get rid of Castro was shared by many high-placed American officials and this common cause led eventually to an unholy alliance between the CIA and the mob. A strange story of CIA agents and mafia mobsters plotting together against Castro was pieced together from interviews with police, federal agents, agents and underworld sources.

Meyer Lansky, the crime syndicate's financial genius, and Santo Trafficante, mafia boss of West Florida and Havana, got out of Cuba immediately after the hasty exit of their benefactor, Fulgencio Batista. The overseers of the gambling casinos remained on the island, nervously waiting for the axe to fall.

"I was in touch with all the casino owners and operators in Havana," said Frank Sturgis, who was Castro's casino pector during this period. "Fidel ordered me to close all the casinos for 30 days. The owners got the hint. They knew he was preparing to shut them down permanently, which he did."

"They were very, very mad. Those casinos were worth \$100 million a year to the American crime syndicate. Every important mob boss in the United States had points (percentages) in the Cuban casinos. Each point was worth \$100,000 to \$100,000."

"Lansky and Trafficante were the top men in Cuban gambling. Lansky did direct business dealings with Batista. Trafficante had several casinos, including the Sans Souci."

Sans Souci partners

His Sans Souci partners included Norman Rothman of Miami Beach and the notorious Mannarino brothers, Gabriel and Sam, Mafia chiefs in Pittsburgh. Rothman and the Mannarinos decided to stop the Castro steamroller in 1958 by smuggling a plane load of arms—stolen from a National Guard armory in Ohio—to anti-Castro forces in Cuba.

According to police and federal sources, Rothman was high up in the Cuban crime syndicate and shared his pockets profits with Batista's brother-in-law, Gen. Robert Fernandez Miran-

Rothman returned to Florida soon after the Castro coup and, with his Cuban partners, bought the Biltmore hotel in Miami Beach, the sources said.

SECRETS OF THE CIA

The hotel's most elegant suite, on the top floor overlooking the ocean, was made ready for Batista, but he chose the cooler climes of the Dominican Republic, Portugal and Madeira.

Sturgis was on friendly terms with several gambling racketeers, including Hyman Levine, a Lansky mobster who ran Havana's Comodoro casino. One evening, during a casual conversation, Levine observed that it "would be worth a million" to the syndicate to get rid of Castro. Sturgis didn't rise to this bait and Levine changed the subject.

It popped up again a few weeks later while Castro was in New York during a whirlwind tour of North and South America.

Fidel and his entourage stayed at the Statler-Hilton, where Sturgis registered under his real name and Cuban military rank, Capt. Frank Fiorini.

Frank was in his room one evening when he received a phone call from a detective captain on duty in the lobby as part of a heavy security detail. No visitors were allowed on the Castro floor without special permission.

"There's a guy here to see you," the cop reported. "He says he's your uncle."

"Send him up," Frank replied.

The short, pot-bellied man who arrived a few minutes later looked more like a godfather than an uncle. Frank recognized him as a member of the Havana gambling mob. Coming straight to the point, the hood offered Frank \$100,000 to kill Castro.

"I'm not for hire," Frank said, ending the conversation.

When he returned to Havana a few days later, he reported the offer to his CIA contacts at the American Embassy.

Sturgis had no further contact with the gangster who approached him in New York, but someone in the intelligence hierarchy decided that the CIA and the syndicate should join forces against Castro. The go-between picked for this project reportedly was Norman Rothman.

"Rothman was in touch with several CIA agents," a former agent told The News. "They had many meetings concerning assassination plots against Castro."

Rothman, in turn, discussed the matter with his peers. Among those who took part in these secret parleys, reliable sources said, were Santo Trafficante of Tampa; Sam Mannarino of Pittsburgh; Salvatore (Sally Burns) Granello and Charles (Charlie the Blade) Tourine, both of New York, and

John (Don) Vegas.

Granello, Genovese crime boss in Cuba and in operation Tourine, an mob chieftain (Boat) Boiarc Calum, also known.

Several at Castro's demi Caspar Mag Inc. who kills various parts was blown in Brooklyn in Magaddino's and Cuba, w chores for Tr:

tro coup. He l a perfect ch assignment, t wasn't offered

The mob a to Roselli, re Vegas, federal

A dapper, himself a H and is a ber showgirls, Ro: duced to CIA: Hughes execu for the FBI. Roselli agreed to go to Cuba l

Money from CIA

The CIA was to supply money, weapons, and transportation.

Roselli flew to Miami in March, 1961, and held separate conferences with CIA agents and Trafficante on the Castro project.

Roselli volunteered to accompany CIA-financed missions to Cuba, the federal sources said. One of these expeditions reportedly landed an execution squad that attempted but failed to hit Castro. On another occasion, the crew of Roselli's launch fought a running gunfight with a Cuban patrol boat.

Columnist Jack Anderson reported that CIA agents gave Roselli some poison capsules which he passed along to a Cuban who was related to Castro's chef. The chef was to put the poison in Castro's food. The sources interviewed by the News confirmed that at least one attempt was made to poison Castro.

An American who was active in the anti-Castro underground in Cuba at the time said "enough poison to kill 10 people" was dumped in a glass of malted milk sent to Castro's suite in the Havana Hilton in 1961.

"Castro ordered a chocolate-milk every afternoon and the same waiter always brought it to his room," he said. "When the waiter came in with the poisoned malt, he was shaking so hard that he almost dropped the tray. Castro said, 'What's wrong with

continues

P. Meskil, Paul
CASTRO, Fidel
ORG 1 MAFIA

CIA 4 Cuba
Sturgis, Frank
Rothman, Norman
Roselli, John
CIA 4.01 ASSASSINATION

(orig under Meskil)